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GUEST COLUMN: Searching for Solutions—A Message to Farmers

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“Water quality is a top priority for us.” That’s what Gov. Scott Walker said in November when he directed the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin, the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, and the Department of Natural Resources to coordinate resources and draft a Request for Proposals that aligns anaerobic digester technology to all sizes of dairy farms in environmentally sensitive areas of Wisconsin. As leaders of those agencies, we take that priority seriously.

This administration has always faced challenges and sought out solutions. This is not just an agricultural issue. Contaminated water can come from several sources but an anaerobic digester that includes a water treatment system is another tool that can go a long way to ensure clean, safe water for all.

Our three agencies have come up with a Request for Proposals that will be released in early January. This RFP, as it’s called, will bring together business consortiums and farmers interested in utilizing anaerobic digester technology to build, operate and maintain a system to treat manure from dairy farms to produce renewable energy in the form of biogas and incorporate a system for treating wastewater that will capture nutrients and reduce pathogens.

We envision a “hub and spoke” model that could use pipelines, or trucks or tractors and manure tanks to transport manure from a number of farms to a central location that houses the digester. This system will allow dairy farms - big and small - the opportunity to participate in this venture. It can assist in manure management at smaller farms by providing an opportunity to cooperate with larger farms. We are pleased with the interest we have already received from digester, water treatment, and fertilizer businesses as well as businesses interested in utilizing the biogas the digester produces.

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To make this public/private project possible, the Public Service Commission authorized Focus on Energy to spend up to \$20 million for Integrated Anaerobic Digester projects that meet Focus on Energy eligibility requirements but also meet certain water treatment standards. The RFP will outline other possible funding sources for that part of the project.

When this project was first proposed, critics were quick to claim that manure digesters do nothing for water quality. That's why this RFP requires proposals that include technologies that can not only produce renewable energy, but can also provide water treatment, pathogen reduction and a way to transport manure to and from a centralized location.

There are many pluses in this project but we understand there will also be many questions that will need answers when undertaking the all-encompassing project that is being proposed. DATCP, DNR and the PSC stand ready to assist interested businesses and farmers in answering their questions as best we can as they put their proposals together.

The dairy industry in Wisconsin has a long history of directly addressing the challenges in front of it through the adoption of improved farming practices and technology. The state is stepping up to partner in efforts to address manure management and water quality. This joint initiative which "is not just another digester program" will be a key step in our many efforts to make sure Wisconsin's water resources are safe and healthy for the citizens of the state. It is our hope that farmers and businesses will also find tangible economic benefits and seriously consider this venture.

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